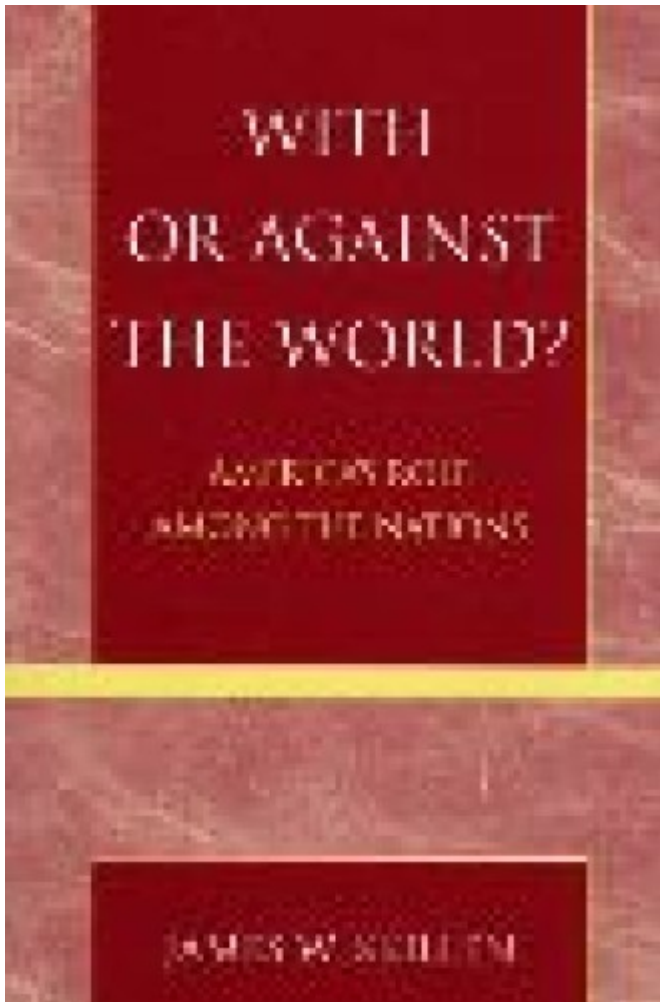


With or Against the World?

reviewed by [Duane K. Friesen](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

In Review



With or Against the World? America's Role Among the Nations

James W. Skillen
Rowman & Littlefield

In this provocative, wide-ranging and well-reasoned book, James Skillen, president of the Center for Public Justice, analyzes the roots of the deep ambiguity in U.S. foreign

policy. The humble and modest view of a constitutionally limited state, Skillen contends, stands in sharp contrast to the grandiose religious vision of a redeemer nation that will bring freedom to the entire world. Although the Bush Doctrine claims that America's aims are noble, that the United States seeks the good of other peoples with no interest in domination or territorial conquest, the nation's "anti-imperial imperialism" masks a self-interest that is furthered by unchallenged military power that extends over the globe. As Skillen points out, the United States cannot act simultaneously as one state among others and as a defender of its own self-interest; it cannot remain unfettered by the restraints of alliances and the United Nations and at the same time be the arbiter of justice for the international order. American action on behalf of the world will inevitably be paternalistic or imperialistic.

Skillen argues that 9/11 did not change the world. Though the shock of the attacks convinced most Americans that the world had changed, the Bush administration's response reflected enduring patterns in U.S. foreign policy and deep sources of American self-understanding. Drawing on the just war tradition, Skillen contends that the United States had just cause to engage in war when the Taliban's complicity with al-Qaeda became clear. He asks, however, whether other just war criteria are being satisfied in U.S. military engagements since 9/11. The category of war must be appropriately assigned, for example. The Bush administration's language of a "war" against terrorism blurs an important distinction between war and policing. "The international effort since 9/11 to mount a cooperative international police and intelligence campaign to stop terrorism is not war," he writes, "and the Bush administration and the media should never have called it war."

Also critical of Jean Bethke Elshtain, Skillen contends that she fails to place war in the broad context of just governance and that she takes a narrow, negative view of just war as a matter of responding to evil by punishing evildoers. Because a true just war is a response to a specific instance of unjust aggression and has a reasonable chance of succeeding, "working to stop terrorism cannot justifiably be called war if one is making careful use of just war criteria." The best way to fight terrorism, Skillen says, is not by war initiated by a particular state but by a cooperative international effort of just governance, just policing and policy that responds to underlying irritants that cause terrorism to flourish.

Though Skillen does not subscribe to Samuel Huntington's thesis of a "clash of civilizations," he does see a symbiotic relationship between the Bush Doctrine, which

is centered on defending a *dar al-freedom* (territory in which freedom reigns) that is threatened by a *dar al-harb* (made up of antifreedom forces that need to be “converted, transformed, set aside, conquered or destroyed”), and the parallel Islamist vision of the *dar al-Islam* (territory in which submission to Allah is observed) and the *dar al-harb* (territory in which submission to Allah is not observed).

The present conflict is analogous to the ideological battle that raged between communism and the capitalist West. All of these ideologies demonstrate the inherent tension in the relationship between ends and means. As Skillen puts it: “In the end, ideally, there will be little or no need of security for freedom because everyone will be enjoying security in freedom. But until that day comes (assume forever), the vanguard of freedom’s future may need to operate a massive security force in the present.” Skillen’s analysis leads one to wonder whether the “temporary” means of a massive security force will ultimately lead to the destruction of the very freedom the force is meant to protect.

In tracing the historical roots of Bush’s September 2002 National Security Strategy, Skillen examines President Wilson’s crusading idealism to “make the world safe for democracy.” “Somewhat like President Wilson’s expectation that maturing nationhood anywhere in the world would follow the American pattern, President Bush seems to have the idea of a new global order that would look like the American federation enlarged.” Only the United States would be sovereign with respect to global security and military forces; other nations would be relatively autonomous (as are the states in the federal system).

Skillen believes that an idealistic vision of human rights and the rule of law that transcends state sovereignty should shape policy so long as it is balanced by a realism that acknowledges a state’s self-interest and the severe limits on what a state can accomplish unilaterally. In a shrinking and interdependent world an international order can be achieved only by cooperation among states. The world needs an absolute commitment neither to state sovereignty nor to global centralism. The United States, as one nation among the community of nations, “should persist in a long-term commitment to cooperation with other states to build stronger, more trustworthy and sustainable international institutions that can lead, demonstrably, to a more just ordering of the international commons.”

To move toward this goal, Skillen argues, Americans must divorce themselves from the conviction that the United States is an exceptional nation, called by God to be a

“light to the nations.” He might have addressed with more depth how this “divorce” might happen. Though he focuses on the state and public policy, he engages in very little analysis of the distinctive role of Christians and the significance of the church as a transnational body among the nations. This issue is especially urgent given the close alliance between Bush and evangelicals. How can the church be transformed into a body whose allegiance to God transcends allegiance to nation and that moves away from the American exceptionalism symbolized by the mantra “God bless America”?

A more nuanced analysis of longstanding debates between pacifists and just war theorists would help in addressing this issue. In arguing against Richard Hays and John H. Yoder for a biblical just war position, Skillen frames the exegetical question too narrowly. An interpretation of specific texts requires a deeper theological understanding of the church as a transnational body with an eschatological vision of the kingdom of God grounded in Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the nations. According to Skillen, in Romans 12 and 13 Paul rejects personal vengeance that is pursued out of personal self-interest or to return evil for evil, but does not oppose violent force that is carried out justly through an office of public responsibility to serve the common good.

Skillen imports into the text the modern question of whether Christians can serve in governmental office. This leads to his misinterpretation of Yoder’s view of Romans 13. Paul is reflecting on the relationship of the church to a pagan government, not advising Christians on their role in offices of public responsibility. Paul reminds believers to follow Jesus not by rebelling against the state but by respecting God’s sovereign ordering of the powers. Even the judicial authority of pagan Rome, symbolized by the sword, can be used by God. It is not plausible that Paul admonishes Christians in Romans 12 to feed their enemies and in Romans 13 to kill them for a just cause.

Skillen’s point of view supports several of the practices of just peacemaking theory, though he does not give explicit attention to that theory. Both pacifists and just war theorists can support pragmatic ways of making peace with justice. Desirable actions include encouraging work with the cooperative forces in the international system; strengthening the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights; and advancing democracy, human rights and religious liberty in a way that is divorced from American exceptionalism and from the illusion that democracy can be extended by military force. Skillen’s critique of American

exceptionalism and his call for a more humble view of America's role among the nations can fruitfully be combined with several just peacemaking practices that emphasize global international cooperation.